



# DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

## news release

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### CALIFORNIA CONDOR PAIR LAYS AND LOSES EGG

Condor Research Center biologists have become the first persons ever to witness the laying of a California condor egg and its loss 12 days later over a cliff edge during a complicated series of disputes between the pair members.

Remarkably, the female laid her egg from a standing position. It fell from a height of nearly a foot to the floor of a cliff cave, apparently without suffering any damage. Whether such egg laying is typical for the species is not known.

According to Dr. Noel Snyder, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service team leader at the Condor Research Center in Ventura, the biologist observed the event through a high-powered telescope at a distance of one-third of a mile in a mountainous region northwest of Los Angeles. The egg was laid at exactly 2:06 p.m., February 14; the female began incubating the egg just six minutes later.

Incubation proceeded smoothly, with both birds taking several-day turns sitting on the egg until February 24, when the female returned from foraging and her mate refused to let her take over the incubation. She attempted to get to the egg for two days, only to be repeatedly rebuffed by the male. Finally, on February 26, she managed to work the egg out from under her mate but it rolled out of the nest cave onto a ledge in the process. The birds attempted to roll the egg back into the cave but were unable to get it up the incline. Ultimately, the egg rolled off the cliff during further disputes over which bird would sit on it.

Only about 30 California condors remain in the wild, all in southern California. "With so few birds left," Dr. Snyder said, "the success of every nesting attempt is important and every loss is a great disappointment." He added that there is still a "reasonably good chance" the pair may lay a second egg, since they lost the first one so early in the breeding season. In fact, the pair was seen courting and checking nestholes again within two days of losing the egg. Normally, California condors lay only one egg every two years but they have been known to re-lay within a year if they lose an egg early.

The condor pair is believed to be the same pair that successfully fledged a chick two years ago from a nest cave close to the one used this year. There were arguments between the pair members in 1980 as well, according to Snyder, but the disputes did not develop so early and caused no apparent harm to the breeding effort.

Only four other active pairs of condors have been located by the research team. One of these produced a fledgling last year and is not expected to breed this year as they are still caring for this youngster. None of the other three pairs has laid as yet, with two months to go in the egg laying season. The research team is keeping close track of all these pairs from a safe distance.

Intensive observation of breeding pairs is just one aspect of the condor research program, conducted by the Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Audubon Society. Recently, permission was granted by the California Fish and Game Commission and the Service for the team to capture limited numbers of juvenile and nonbreeding adult condors for captive breeding and radio telemetry. No birds have been caught in the first month of trapping effort, although several have visited the bait sites. The captive breeding program will be conducted at the San Diego Wild Animal Park and the Los Angeles Zoo. Birds trapped for radio telemetry will be outfitted with small solar transmitters on their wings and then released.

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